

# 6 Sources of Protein That Aren't Meat

There are clear health risks associated with eating red and processed meat. Here are six alternatives.



By Sophie Egan

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Scientists have long known about the downsides of red and processed meats. Eating them has been linked with increased risks of health issues like heart disease, some types of cancer and earlier death. And research suggests that replacing those protein sources with nonmeat alternatives like legumes, nuts, whole grains and more can improve your health in the long run.

Such swaps can also be better for the environment — and your wallet.

“You hear the argument that eating healthy is expensive,” said Sara Elnakib, a dietitian and public health expert at Rutgers University. But you can enjoy plant-based sources of protein like beans right out of the can or ready-to-eat whole grains heated in the microwave. “It can be really easy. That’s the point: Whatever way you can get them into your system, do that,” Dr. Elnakib said.

Here are six sources of protein that aren't red or processed meat, and the reasons experts love them.

# Legumes



Heather Willensky for The New York Times

Beans, peas, lentils, peanuts — legumes are “affordable, nutritious and delicious,” said Julia Wolfson, an associate professor of international health at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Federal guidelines recommend that most people ages 19 and older get 0.36 grams of protein per pound of body weight per day (though personal needs can vary). For a 150-pound adult, this translates to 54 grams of protein per day.

Legumes are excellent at helping you hit that mark. A half cup of cooked lentils, for instance, has nearly nine grams of protein.

Legumes are also loaded with fiber, antioxidants and nutrients like B vitamins, iron and potassium. Some beans even have more inflammation-reducing and cancer-fighting antioxidants than berries, Dr. Elnakib said.

All of these attributes may explain why legumes are linked to reduced risks of heart disease and Type 2 diabetes, said Anna Herforth, a visiting associate professor of human nutrition and health at Wageningen University in the Netherlands.

Legumes are also sustainable, as they are one of the least resource-intensive sources of protein on the planet, Dr. Herforth said.

## Eggs



Heather Willensky for The New York Times

While high egg prices may be one reason to avoid them for the moment, experts say that in normal times, they're an inexpensive, convenient source of protein that can be eaten in countless ways.

One egg packs six grams of protein, an impressive amount for its relatively low 70 calories. And it contains a host of nutrients like vitamin B12, riboflavin and vitamin D.

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Eggs are an especially good source of protein for someone who is vegetarian or who wants to incorporate more vegetarian meals into their diet, Dr. Wolfson said. She encouraged people to think beyond breakfast: Have eggs in a savory omelet or frittata for dinner, she said, or add a hard-boiled egg to the side of a vegetable-centric entree.

# Fish



Heather Willensky for The New York Times

Many types of fish, especially oily options like salmon and anchovies, are considered much healthier alternatives to meat.

A 3.5-ounce serving of wild caught salmon has about 22 grams of protein. But the main nutritional selling point of fish over meat is that fish is loaded with heart-healthy unsaturated fats. Red meat, by comparison, is rich in saturated fats, which can increase the risk of heart disease, said Dr. Qi Sun, an associate professor of nutrition and epidemiology at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

Dr. Sun recommends choosing fish that are low in mercury (a heavy metal that can be particularly dangerous for children and pregnant women) and high in omega-3 fatty acids. Eating omega-3-rich foods has been associated with a reduced risk for

heart disease — “especially fatal heart disease,” Dr. Sun said. Salmon, sardines, anchovies and trout check all of those boxes.

## Dairy



Heather Willensky for The New York Times

Low- and no-fat dairy products like milk, yogurt and cottage cheese are often inexpensive and versatile sources of protein, said Alice H. Lichtenstein, a professor of nutrition science and policy at Tufts University.

A one-cup serving of low-fat milk contains about eight grams of protein, a two-third cup serving of plain nonfat Greek yogurt has about 18 grams, and a half-cup serving of low-fat cottage cheese has about 12 grams. Dairy products supply high-

quality protein, meaning they contain every essential amino acid, “in the right proportions, for the human body to function optimally,” Dr. Lichtenstein said.

These foods don't require any preparation when eaten on their own, but they can also be combined with countless other foods to form a healthy meal, she added.

They can also be rich in certain nutrients some people don't consume enough of, like calcium and vitamin D, Dr. Lichtenstein said. And nonfat and low-fat dairy options are lower in saturated fats compared with meat.

## Nuts and Seeds



Heather Willensky for The New York Times

Nuts — such as almonds, walnuts, pistachios, pecans and cashews — have between about three and six grams of protein per one-ounce serving. They also offer a host of nutritional benefits like fiber and healthy fats, which Dr. Wolfson said are good for gut health, heart health and blood sugar control. To incorporate more nuts into your diet, try spreading peanut butter onto toast or mixing nuts into your morning granola, Dr. Herforth said.

Seeds like sesame, hemp, pumpkin, chia, flax and sunflower seeds have between about five and nine grams of protein per one-ounce serving. “Americans don’t often think about seeds,” Dr. Wolfson said. But they should: They’re loaded with protein and fiber. And, she added, they can be incorporated into salads, sandwiches and other entrees, mixed into breakfast “puddings,” blended into smoothies, or eaten plain as a snack or as part of trail mix.

## Whole Grains

Heather Willensky for The New York Times

When Dr. Elnakib married her husband, he “only ate white rice,” she said. To change that, she gradually increased the ratio of quinoa to white rice in their regular rice pilafs without him noticing, until he got used to the quinoa and it became their family routine.

Dr. Elnakib particularly loves quinoa because it contains a lot of protein — about eight grams per cooked cup — as well as fiber and unsaturated fats.

But there are other higher-protein whole grains to love, including rolled oats, wild rice, buckwheat, teff, millet and amaranth. They all supply protein, as well as a variety of essential vitamins and minerals.

**Sophie Egan** writes about food, health and sustainability. She is the author of the book, “How to Be a Conscious Eater: Making Food Choices That Are Good for You, Others, and the Planet.”

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